

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



William H. Stevens
1818-1880

During the mid-nineteenth century when the professions of architecture and engineering were in their infancy, some early practitioners provided services in both fields. William H. Stevens was particularly successful in acquiring sufficient expertise in hydraulic engineering and in architecture to design everything from textile mills to stylish homes. As a leading architect in the twin cities of Lewiston and Auburn, Stevens participated in the industrial development of both communities during the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

Born in West Gardiner in 1818, William H. Stevens learned the trade of carpentry before moving to Lewis-

ton in 1849. He acquired a farm on East Avenue, then on the outskirts of what was a village on the verge of major industrial development. It cannot be said that he moved there in anticipation of the construction of the large textile mills, however. Just as the first factories were to be built by Boston capitalists, Stevens and five others departed for California in 1851, presumably in search of gold. He remained there four years, working as a teamster and a carpenter.¹

When Stevens returned in 1855, he found Bates Mill Number 1 and the Hill Mill up and running. There is no record of Stevens' activities when he returned, although he listed himself as a "house carpenter" in the 1860 census. By 1864, however, he was employed with the Franklin Company as a builder. Sometime within the next four years his position became that of "architect and builder."²

The first documented reference that William Stevens designed a building is in 1865. That year the *Lewiston Falls Journal* noted that the new Worumbo Mill in Lisbon Falls was completed and that "Mr. W. H. Stevens of Lewiston prepared the plans of the building and had general superintendence of the work, with Alvin Smith of Auburn as master mechanic."³ The Worumbo Mill Corporation included among its board of directors mill engineer Amos D. Lockwood, Agent for the Franklin Company and Stevens' superior. It is not known when Stevens acquired his expertise in mill design and hydraulic engineering, but Amos Lockwood, who came to Lewiston in 1858, could have provided valuable advice in the construction of textile mills.

As originally built the Worumbo Mill had virtually no ornamentation and represented what had evolved into standard design for a textile mill after the Civil War. This consisted of four stories of brick construction, with multi-pane sash (for easy replacement of broken glass) recessed between three foot wide pilasters which provided the necessary wall thickness for structural stability. There was also a low pitched gable roof to eliminate attic space where fires could spread undetected. Exterior stairs towers eliminated enclosed spaces from the interior of the mill itself,



Figure 1. Lincoln Boarding House Block, Lewiston, circa 1870 view (MHPC).

another fire prevention measure. The tower was usually the most ornate feature if the budget allowed architectural decoration. In the case of the Worumbo Mill, built in the uncertain last year of the Civil War, the only concession to style was the series of brackets supporting the eaves of the roof. It was not until 1894 that ornate belfries were added by architect George M. Coombs, making Worumbo one of the most picturesque mills in Maine.

The Franklin Company was involved in many development activities beyond the construction of mill buildings. In 1867-68 Stevens was directed to prepare plans for the new Lincoln Boarding House for the operatives of the Lincoln Mill (Figure 1). The five story brick building was elegantly fashioned with Italianate style brackets supporting a cornice and balconies with balustrades over the two doorways. The two entrances were arranged to separate men and women into eighty lodging rooms. Both sexes had access to the dining hall. The building also featured parlors and bathing rooms with hot and cold water. As noted at the time, "... such efforts for the comfort of the employees show that corporations have souls."⁴ The observation is ironic, for the Lincoln Boarding House was the last major effort by the mill owners to provide comfortable quarters for their employees. By the 1880s the building had been sold and remodeled as the Atwood Hotel.

In his capacity as Agent for the Franklin Company, Amos Lockwood also had Stevens design a substantial remodeling of the DeWitt Hotel, which was owned by the company. The project included making a full story out of the attic and adding a cornice and verandas.⁵

William Stevens was still employed as the architect for the Franklin Company when he undertook to design the Bates Street School in 1868.⁶ That year marked the beginning of a major period of construction activity in Lewiston and Auburn, and it was clear that there was a great opportunity to establish a private practice. Since the 1850s there had been only one local architect, Hubbard Lovejoy, and he was no longer active by that time. Most major commissions, such as the Androscoggin County Courthouse, the Lewiston City Hall, and numerous churches, went to Boston architects. With the Bates Street School, Stevens demonstrated his ability to work in the highly fashionable mansard style. No doubt his service on the

Lewiston Common Council at the time provided valuable business connections.

In 1870 William H. Stevens was elected mayor of Lewiston, a one year term which coincided with his opening a private practice as an architect. The same year another architect, Charles F. Douglas, arrived from Skowhegan to set up an architectural office.



Figure 2. Roak Block, Auburn, circa 1875 view (MHPC).

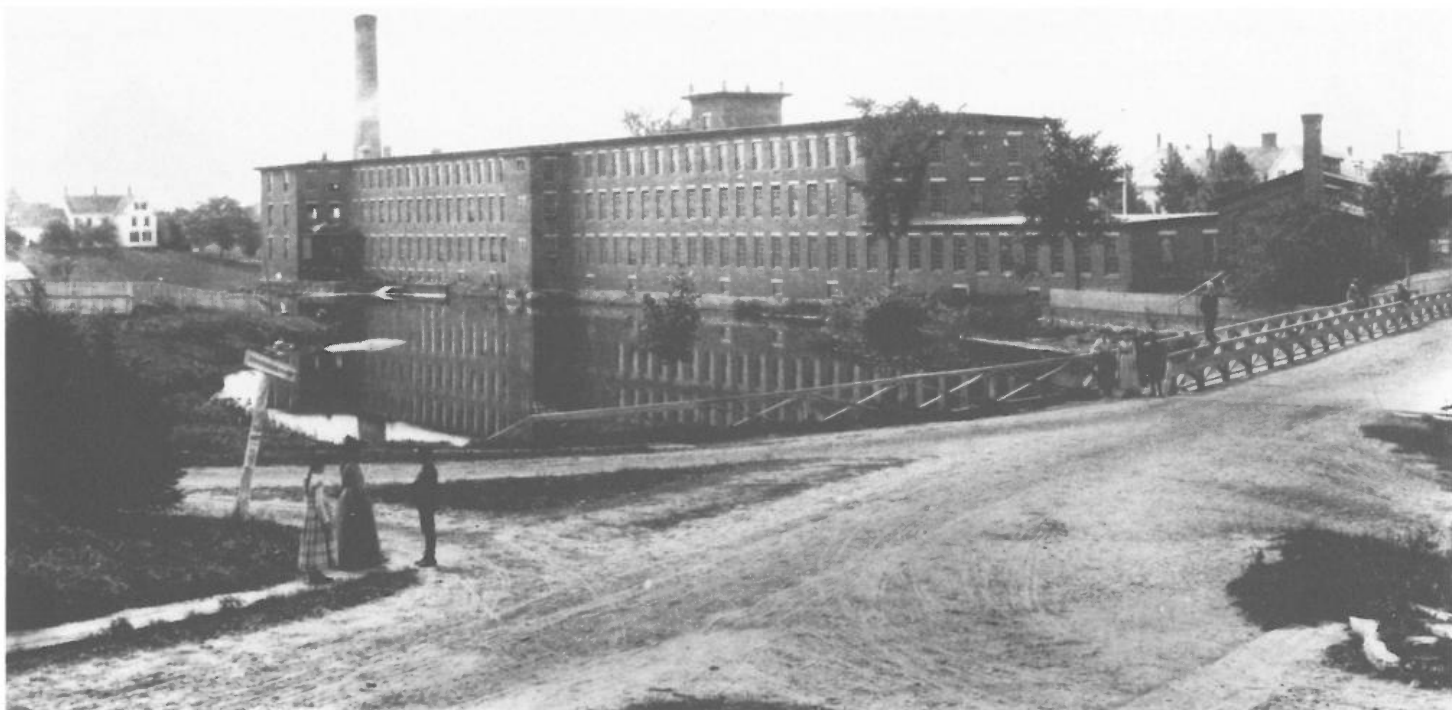


Figure 3. Farwell Mills, Lisbon, circa 1890 view (MHPC).

Over the next three years these two men were the only architects in the area. Most of the major commissions went to Douglas, who did not have expertise in hydraulic engineering. Consequently, when that architect designed the Barker Mill in 1872, Stevens was engaged to prepare plans for the water wheel that powered the mill.⁷

However, Douglas did not receive all of the important commissions. In 1871 Jacob Roak, one of the founders of the shoe industry in Auburn, assembled a group of investors to finance the erection of a large four story commercial block containing nine stores (Figure 2). At that time most of the shoe manufacturers worked out of commercial blocks, and Roak's enterprise was undertaken for the purpose of providing space for the many new shoe companies which were forming in Auburn. Stevens designed an impressive mansard style block with granite trim and cast iron columns and cresting. The Roak Block represented a major undertaking for Auburn, and the building still has a commanding presence along the river in the central business district.⁸

With his experience in working for the Franklin Company, it was logical that Stevens would be selected by Nathan W. Farwell to design his new cotton mill in Lisbon, begun in 1872 (Figure 3). Although similar to the Worumbo Mill, this structure was somewhat more stylish with its Italianate style bell tower. Over the next several years Farwell also had Stevens plan a stone dam and buildings for his bleacheries in Lewiston and Lawrence, Massachusetts.

During the early 1870s construction activity accelerated in Lewiston and Auburn with the growth of both the textile and shoe industries. In order to compete with a successful architect like Charles Douglas, Stevens formed a partnership with Francis H. Fassett in June, 1873. Fassett and his son Edward resided in Portland and had the largest architectural practice in Maine. According to the Lewiston city directory for 1874-74, Edward worked in Lewiston with Stevens during this brief partnership.⁹ Although this association lasted only a year, the architects secured commissions for several important projects, such as the Webster Grammar School in Auburn, the Lincoln Street School in Lewiston, and a residence for one of the leading political figures in the state, Senator William P. Frye. The design for this house featured a mansard roof and was a conservative interpretation of what was the most popular architectural style in the area.

In late 1873 Charles F. Douglas left for Philadelphia, but two more architectural firms opened offices in Lewiston and Auburn. Two Englishmen, Herbert and Balston Kenway, started a practice in Auburn which offered services in architecture and civil engineering. The Kenways' domestic designs included several unusual Gothic Revival style houses which satisfied the growing popularity for picturesque architecture. In 1874 George M. Coombs, a young architect who had worked for Douglas, formed a partnership with a Portland designer named Charles H. Kimball. By the middle of 1874 three firms, Fassett & Stevens, the Kenway Brothers, and Kimball & Coombs, were all competing for projects in what

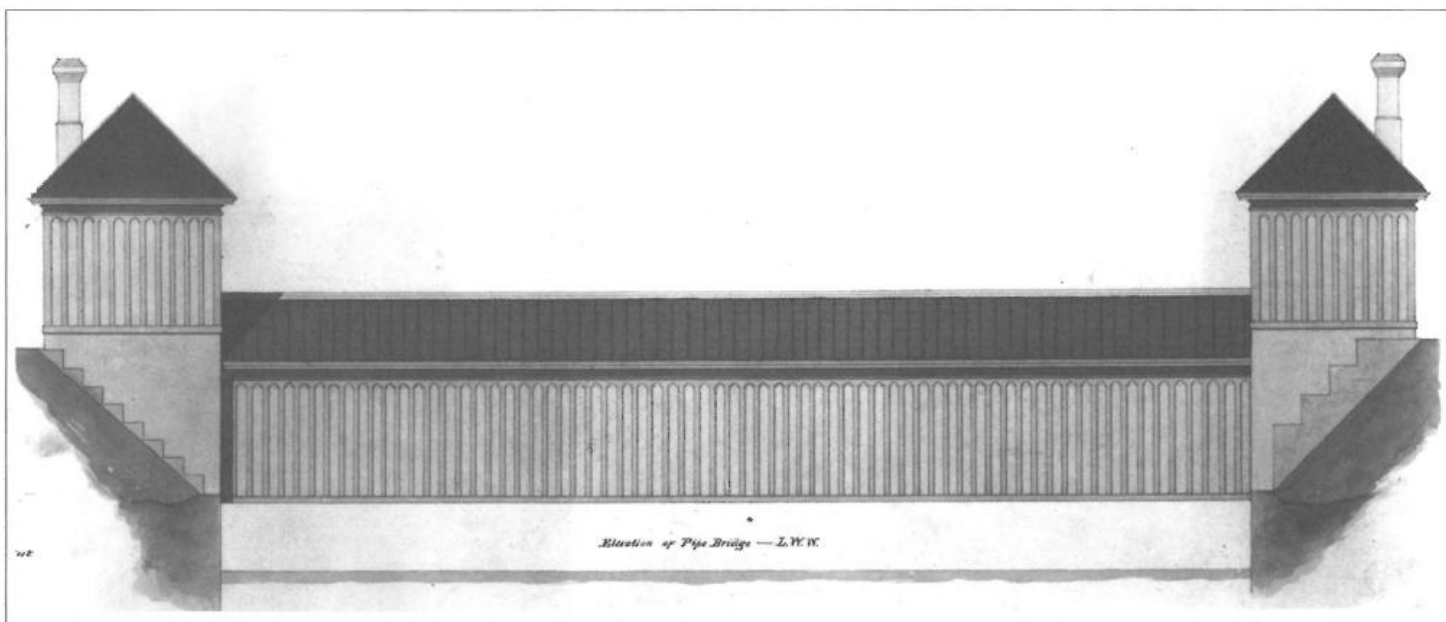


Figure 4. Elevation drawing of Pipe Bridge for the Lewiston Water Works, circa 1878 (Courtesy of Maine Historical Society).

turned out to be a serious nation-wide depression. As a result, by the end of the year the Fassett & Stevens and Kimball & Coombs partnerships had been dissolved, to be followed by the Kenway Brothers in the next year. Stevens practiced alone for a few months before forming a partnership with George Coombs in mid-1875.¹⁰

In 1874, while William Stevens was practicing on his own between partners, he designed a house for G. R. Wiley in Bethel (Figure 5). The drawings for this Italianate style house are the only ones to survive which bear Stevens' signature alone and offer an interesting illustration of his drafting style. To the extent that these drawings are representative of the architect's work, they show a sparse and direct rendering technique which is quite different from those drawings that survive from both the Fassett & Stevens and Stevens & Coombs firms. Moreover, the design for the Wiley House was typical of the period and a fairly conservative interpretation of the style. In contrast, the work of Stevens & Coombs reflects the latest trends in picturesque architecture then gaining popularity around the country. This, combined with the knowledge that Stevens was ill for much of the last years of his life, provides circumstantial evidence that George Coombs was responsible for much of the innovative domestic work of the new firm.¹¹

By the time of his death in August, 1880, William H. Stevens had acquired a statewide reputation as an authority on hydraulic engineering.¹² Thus, it is likely that he was the principal designer for three major projects by Stevens & Coombs. Two of these were the bleacheries for Nathan W. Farwell in Lewiston and

Lawrence, Massachusetts, both built in 1876-77 in an Italianate style that employed brackets and brick corbelling for ornamental effect. The third was the city water works system in Lewiston, installed in 1878 (Figure 4). Although this system has been substantially rebuilt over the years, the Italianate style gate house, recently restored by the Union Power Company, survives as a monument to Stevens' career as an architect and engineer (Figure 6).

Roger G. Reed

NOTES

1. W. H. Stevens obituary, *Lewiston Evening Journal*, August 20, 1880.
2. The Lewiston City Directory for 1869 lists his position as "architect and builder." Although the records of the Franklin Company survive, they are unavailable to scholars.
3. *Lewiston Falls Journal*, April 13, 1865.
4. *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 1, 1868.
5. *Ibid.*, November 5, 1868.
6. *Ibid.*, March 20, 1869.
7. *Lewiston Weekly Journal*, August 29, 1872.
8. *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 15, 1872.
9. *Lewiston Evening Journal*, June 16, 1873, provided a notice that the partnership was formed.
10. There is a brief period between the summer of 1874 and the summer of 1875 when the newspaper provides notices of work by Stevens without mentioning a partner. This coincides with the period when the Wiley House was built.
11. As early as 1875 there was a newspaper report that Stevens was "seriously ill" (*Lewiston Evening Journal*, September 14, 1875.) In his obituary it was noted that



Figure 5. Elevation drawing of the G.R. Wiley House, Bethel, 1874 (Courtesy of Maine Historical Society).

"During the last eighteen months of his life, Mr. Stevens had been gradually failing." The same account also stated that he never fully recovered from a fall at the Sprague Mill in Augusta a few years earlier.

12. For example, he served as a consultant to the Town of Houlton for their water system.

KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY WILLIAM H. STEVENS (INCLUDING FASSETT & STEVENS)

Worumbo Mill, Lisbon Falls, 1865, Destroyed
Lincoln Mill, Additions, Lewiston, 1866-68, Altered
Lincoln Boarding House Block, Lewiston, 1867-68,
Destroyed
DeWitt Hotel, Additions, Lewiston, 1868, Destroyed
Bates Street School, Lewiston, 1868, Altered
Bonnallie Block, Main and Bates Streets, Lewiston, 1870,
Altered
Androscoggin Mill No. 3, Lewiston, 1871, Altered
Roak Block, Main Street, Auburn, 1871-72, Extant
Farwell Mills, Lisbon, 1873-74, Extant
Workshop, Androscoggin County Jail, Auburn, 1873,
Destroyed

Lincoln Street Bridge, Lewiston, 1873, Destroyed (Fassett & Stevens)
Lincoln Street School*, Lewiston, 1873, Destroyed (Fassett & Stevens)
Pilsbury Block, Addition, Lisbon Street, Lewiston, 1873,
Extant (Fassett & Stevens)
Unidentified Mill, Hallowell, 1873, Unlocated (Fassett & Stevens)
H. W. Barbour Double House*, Bates Street, Lewiston,
1873, Destroyed (Fassett & Stevens)
Webster Grammer School*, Spring Street, Auburn, 1873,
Altered (Fassett & Stevens)
William P. Frye House*, Main Street, Lewiston, 1873-74,
Extant (Fassett & Stevens)
School, Newport, 1874, Destroyed (Fassett & Stevens)
George A. Parker House, Webster Street, Lewiston, 1874,
Unlocated (Fassett & Stevens)
Methodist Church, Hammond Street, Lewiston, 1874,
Destroyed (Fassett & Stevens)
A. Huse House, Court Street, Bath, 1874, Destroyed
(Fassett & Stevens)
Office Building*, Continental Mills, Lewiston, 1874,
Destroyed (Fassett & Stevens)
Isaac Golder House*, Sabattus Street, Lewiston, 1874,
Destroyed (Fassett & Stevens)

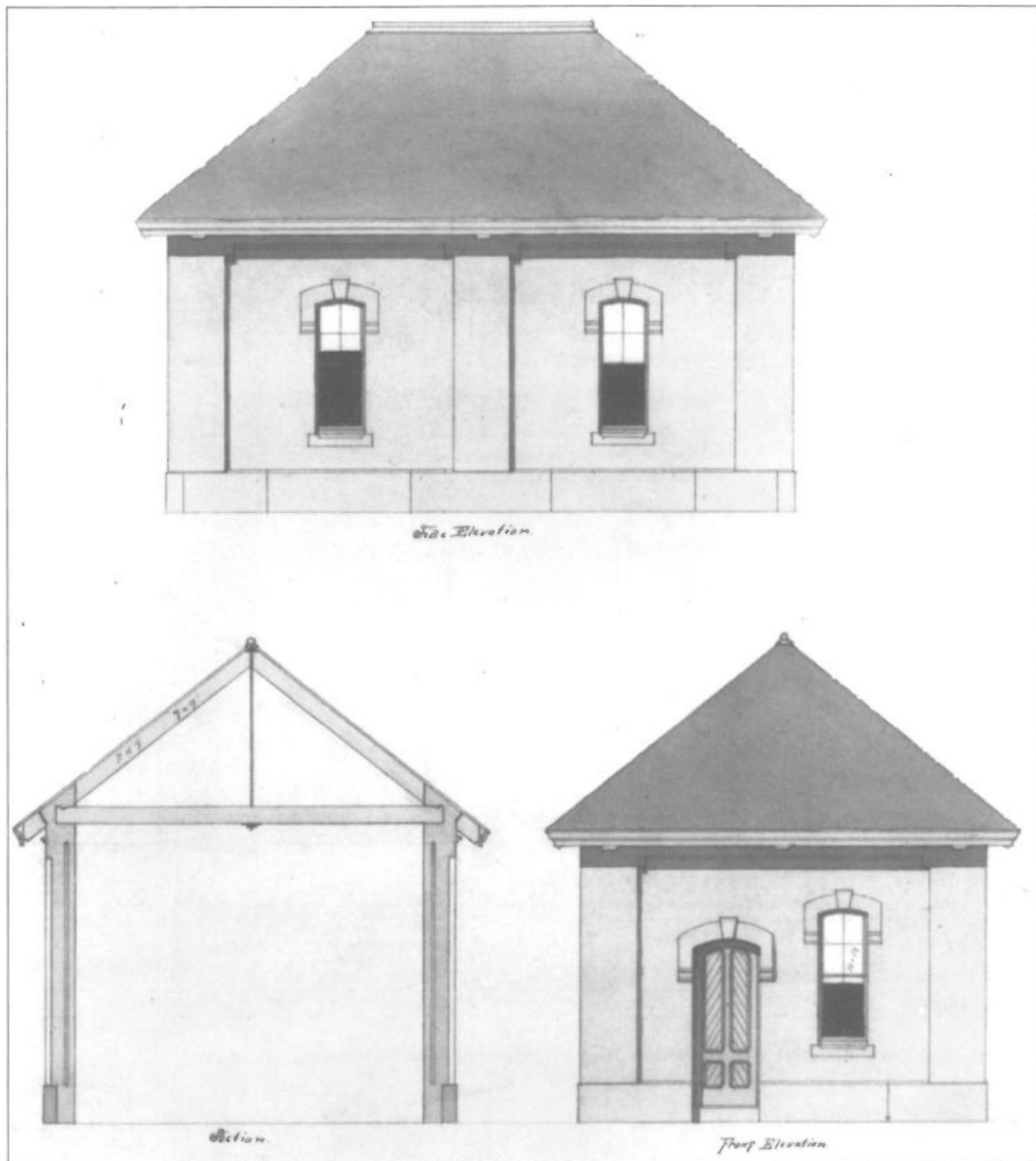


Figure 6. Elevation drawing of Gate House for the Lewiston Water Works, circa 1878 (Courtesy of Maine Historical Society).

Judge A. K. P. Knowlton House, College Street, Lewiston,
1874, Extant (Fassett & Stevens)
G. R. Wiley House*, Church Street, Bethel, 1874,
Destroyed
Office Building, Barker Mill, Auburn, 1875, Destroyed
Ehrenfried Arcade, Lisbon Street, Lewiston, 1875,
Destroyed
City Farm Building, River Road, Lewiston, 1875,
Destroyed
McClure & Smith Store, Main Street, Lewiston, 1875,
Destroyed
Lewiston Mills, Wheelpit Addition, Lewiston, 1875,
Altered

The work of the firm Stevens & Coombs will be subject to another dictionary entry. However, it should be noted here that Stevens' work in this period included the Lewiston Water System, for which he designed a Gate House, a Pump House, a Reservoir House, and a Pipe House in 1878. Only the Gate House survives.

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

There are a number of drawings in the Coombs Collection at Maine Historical Society which were the work of Fassett & Stevens and Stevens & Coombs. Drawings for buildings from the period prior to Stevens & Coombs are noted in the list above with an asterisk.

Volume 7, 1995

Published by Maine Citizens for Historic Preservation
Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Editor
Roger G. Reed, Associate Editor